WBAA → [My topic this morning is best introduced by way of 4 sentences taken from different ~~books~~ places in the New Testa+]

Enjoy, Enjoy!
Psalm 47
New Testament Selected, I John 1:4
September 5, 1971
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"Clap your hands, stamp your feet! Let your bodies and your voices explode with joy. God is not some human concoction. He is for real! And he is here! Despite all attempts to rationalize him out of existence, He is in our world, and he reigns over our universe.

The rulers of nations often ignore him. Men of learning often pass him by. The masses of his creatures substitute their own little gods in his place and worship the things they can see and feel. There are others who build fortresses about themselves and manifest no need for God.

Our great God will not be ignored. He will not remove himself from our world. Let us recognize his presence and fill the air with him praises." [Paraphrase - Psalm 47, "Alive"]

"So the Lord's people shall come back, set free, and enter Zion with shouts of triumph, crowned with everlasting joy: joy and gladness shall overtake them as they come, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."(Isaiah 51:11)

"At the sight of the star they were overjoyed." (Matthew 2:10)

"Do not be afraid: I have good news for you: there is great joy coming to the whole people." (Luke 2:10)

"How blest are you when men hate you. . . On that day be glad and dance for joy." (Luke 6:23)

"I have spoken thus to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete." (John 15:11)

"They hurried away from the tomb in awe and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples." (Matthew 28:8)

"The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but justice, peace and joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17)

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace by your faith in him, until by the power of the Holy Spirit, you overflow with hope." (Romans 14:17)

"We write this in order that the joy of us all may be complete." (IJohn 1:4)

Something's happening here. Something's been going in the life of the people of God for thousands of years: something illusive and strange, something secret: something that has life and reality quite apart from external circumstances. Out of the dim recesses of the past we hear it, the shouting of the people of Israel - "Clap your hands"; the words of the prophet to an exiled and captive nation, - "The Lord's people shall come back, set free, and enter Zion with shouts of triumph, crowned with everlasting joy": one man speaking to twelve close friends - "Be glad and dance for joy;" a later chronicler, writing to a persecuted, struggling church - "We write this in order that the joy of all of us may be complete."

There is no way to read the Bible without realizing that one of the major characteristic of the people on its pages is joy. Joy is a major Biblical theme. And in the Bible joy is not occasional, nor isolated from the daily events of life: it is not a superficial happiness that depends entirely on something fortunate or lucky occuring. Rather it is part and parcel of being the people of God. It is not so much a consequence of having faith in that God, as it is one of the gifts God gives his children. Joy in the Bible is summarized in the first question and answer in the shorter Catechism written in the 17th century: "What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Enjoy God? A strange way of putting it, isn't it? Yet, there it is, all through the Bible.

Harry Emerson Fosdick put his finger on the essence of the idea when he wrote: "The New Testament is the most joyful book in the world. It opens with joy over the birth of Jesus; and it ends with a superb picture of a multitude which no man could number, singing Hallelujah Choruses. No matter where you open it, amid fortunate or discouraging circumstances, you always hear the note of joy.

Even when a company of friends gather at a farewell supper before their leader is crucified, he says to them, 'These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.'

Even when their best friend has gone, the mourners take 'their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God.' If they are flogged for their faith, the disciples depart from the council rejoicing that they are 'counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name.'

When an apostle is put in jail overnight he passes the time singing, and if you listen to him in his Roman prison, you will hear him dictating, 'Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, rejoice.'

There is enough tragedy in the New Testament to make it the saddest book in the world, but instead, it is the most joyful."

And yet, we live in what I observe to be a joyless world, and what I would suggest to you is an essentially joyless time. We are part of a cultural situation that fancies itself Christian, and which has, in fact, evolved from a Christian way of perceiving history, men and institutions. And yet it is a situation that keeps looking pretty grim whenever represented in picture or print. The catalog of woes increases daily. We're fouling up the rivers, oceans, air and landscape. We have more nerve gas than we can dispose of decently and more nuclear weapons than we need to incinerate every man, woman and child on the face of the earth several times over. ~~Through the mass-media~~ we are keenly aware that people are killing each other in northern Ireland, ~~Pakistan,~~ the Near East Southeast Asia, and all over Africa and South America. At home, we wring our hands over the apparent bankruptcy of our own structures and institutions: big cities can't be governed, the educational establishment is turning out people for whom there are no jobs: racial animosity heightens daily; politicians talk: and from all over our culture the consensus seems to be that we are going to hell in a hand basket. "A pretty heavy scene," the young might say. And I think all of us feel worn down by the heavy weight of cultural problems in the face of which we

feel quite powerless.

The fact is there is no joy out there. It's all very grim, and as individuals we do one of two things about it. We either take ourselves too seriously and engage in a monumental amount of hand-wringing, or we say - in a sense - "Stop the world, I'm here and now getting off." Some of us do the first - for some of us things are so bad we honestly feel that joy and humor are irresponsible. The young, I think, are inclined in this direction - and need nothing so much as to laugh, occasionally, at themselves and the absurdity of things in general. Some of us go the other route, having given up on the world - looking, seeking, pursuing joy in external stimuli. Happiness, for us, is a task to be accomplished, an item in the budget.

William Stringfellow tells about traveling to a small town in the mid-west to be a best man in the wedding of a close friend. It was a wealthy community and he was exposed in a day and a half to seven parties attended by the same people, saying the same things to each other. But before he left this festive affair he had learned about - the wife swapping and the suicide that resulted: the young executive who was becoming an alcoholic: and the major drug problem raging among the teen age children of many of those having such fun at the seven parties. His reflection: "There was too little life and joy in this place. Death was indeed, as far as I could discern, very much at work there despite the security of the people from the ordinary threats of disease, poverty or overcrowding." [p. 68 Free in Obedience]

What happens to us? We are born with the uninhibited capacity to enjoy - as anyone familiar with a year old child well knows. What happens to that capacity over the years? In a little magazine called "Alive" I found a piece by a father that I wish I had written. Listen to some excerpts - "I suppose it all started when Ethan was born - for an hour we held him, and he was warm and close and peaceful . . . I kept thinking that this might be the most important hour of his life. What a way to begin, by giving

joy to his parents. . . The joy continues. When Ethan smiles, every cell of his body smiles, including his turned-up toes. When he is unhappy, he is unhappy, all over. When he is interested in a new object, only he and the object exist. He touches it, tastes it, smells it, puts it on things, puts things in it, gives it to people, takes it from people, looks at it from far and from near. The total absorption is beautiful to watch."

Well, where does it go? Is it inevitable that the joy of Ethan shall never return? Is it possible that somehow we are so wrongheaded in our own approach to life that we stamp out this beautiful gift of God in our own children? To watch a little child -- which is a thoroughly worthwhile past-time - is to sense nostalgia, and wistfulness and sadness. Because we were once like that. James Cavanaugh put it in verse;

"Little boy, I miss you, with your sudden smile
and your ignorance of pain.
YOu walked in life and devoured it . . without anything but
misty goals to keep you company.
Your heart beat mightily when you chased frogs
There was not time for meaning - a marshmallow gave it on
a sharpened stick -
a jacknife in your pocket . . .
a flower in the woods . . .
A dog who danced and licked at your fingers
and chewed your jeans.
A game of football you didn't expect
A glass of cider, a cricket's cry.
When did you lose your eyes and ears, when did taste
buds cease to tremble:
Whence this sullenness, this mounting fear, this quarrel
with life - demanding meaning?"

[There Are Men too Gentle to Live Among Wolves]

Where does it go? What happens to it? Is it absolutely necessary that life be robbed of this essential joyfulness? I think not - I hope not. And I, for one, keep turning to the church to be what the world is not, and to say something that will restore some balance to the "heavy scene" out there, and to affirm something and celebrate something that will equip me to look it all in the face and laugh out loud. For the Church of Jesus Christ - if it is an extension of those happy people of God in the Bible - is precisely the bearer of great joy - the affirmer and celebrator of good news.

But it never quite comes off that way. There is a dangerous disease gnawing away at the life of the church. It was described in an article I read on "Games Church People Play" as NWIT - "Now we're in trouble." It is played with gleeful dispair by people across Presbyterianism: "Boy, are we in bad shape: we have a money problem and an attendance problem: and a curriculum problem and what it really is - I believe - is a monumental theological problem.

I don't know what happens to joy, but I have a growing suspicion that the answer will be found in some simple theology. One thing is certain; religion in this culture - ~~particularly Presbyterian religion~~ - has never been an example of human joyfulness. In fact, the opposite is so much the case that authors occasionally chose the word "Presbyterian" as a synonym for sobriety and somberness and long faced, grim piety.

We are saddled with a bad image: and of all the institutions of our culture the church is probably one of the last people expect to be joyful. And the reason, as I suggested, is theological. Somewhere in the life of the early Christian Church, Christians started thinking like Greeks. Somewhere the Greek notion that things of the spirit are good and things of the flesh evil crept into Christian theology. The result was a theological stance which maintained, in essence, that God made a mistake when he gave us bodies. Pleasure was suspect - and sexuality was to be hidden, disguised and ignored. The truly good man - would be one untainted by sexual relation

relationships. And it was that subtle shift - that move away from the lusty, life affirming heritage of Judaism, to the antiseptic dualism of the Greek, that to this day robs Christian faith of its profound joyfulness. We are still very much caught up in the position that if it is fun, it must be immoral; and if it feels good, it has to be sinful. When we worship - it looks and sounds for all the world as if we are engaged in corporate mourning. My friend, Jim Ollis, campus pastor at I.U., says that if a stranger from another planet happened upon an average Presbyterian congregation at worship he would quickly conclude that God is dead. Liturgy - the forms and rituals of worship - that are intended to help us express joy together somehow do the reverse, and end up restraining and inhibiting. Hymns - vehicles of joy and praise - come out sounding as if the singers are either very sad or simply not interested.

Listen to the words of a woman sitting in a service of worship -

"In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming or rummaging through his mother's handbag. He was just smiling.

Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theatre off Broadway said, "Stop that grinning! You're in church!' With that, she gave him a belt on his hindside and as the tears rolled down his cheeks added, 'That's better,' and returned to her prayers.

Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me the entire world is in tears and if you're not, then you'd better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us. I wanted to tell him he is an understanding God. One who understands little children who pick their noses in church because they are bored. He understands the man in the parking lot who reads the comics while his wife is attending church. He even understands my shallow prayers that implore, 'If you can't make me thin, then make my friends look fat.'

What a fool, I thought. Here was a woman sitting next to the only light left in our civilization . . the only hope, our only miracle. . . our only promise of infinity. If he couldn't smile in church, where was there left to go?" [p. 9 "Alive"]

The irony ~~of our situation~~ is that the whole reason ~~we are here~~: ~~the entire rationale for the existence of this church~~ for the Christian religion - is something called Good News. God is. God is alive: God creates: God comes: God came in Jesus Christ: God keeps coming into our lives. We are free - we are safe. Nothing in life can defeat us: nothing can ultimately hurt us. The sting has been taken out of death: there is no longer reason to be afraid. In suffering, sickness, trouble we have a resource, a friend, a helper. In tragedy and grief, everlasting arms: in warfare, depression, strife - a God who is still sovereign. There is at the heart of our ~~existence as a Christian people~~ faith - Good News. that needs to be affirmed, sung, told, lived and even shouted.

Now, it seems to me that we either haven't heard the good news yet, or we've heard it and don't really believe it, or else we have heard it and do believe it, but we can't quite let go of ourselves enough to express the profound joy that is inside and wants to be released. I think it's the latter. I think you and I need to do some deep soul searching and reflecting, and then consciously, intentionally, try to let out all the joy we keep hidden inside. I think we can learn to feel joy, and to give to joy: to express joy and share joy.

I think we need to do that. And I think the world needs us to do it. And I think once we learn: once we move from life denying to life affirming: once we change our attitudes about worship and the church and ourselves we will find that it's a great and good thing to know what joy is.

St. Augustine once said: "A Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot:" - and Jesus Christ, our Lord - "I have spoken thus to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete." Amen.